

## ANTICIPATION AND CONCEPTION: A BRIEF STUDY IN

### WILLA CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!*

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#### ABSTRACT

*This paper illuminates the ambitions and the values that shape Cather's O Pioneers! Cather wants us to be inside in each and every character, from her novels, one can learn the development of nature. In this paper, I try to explore the ideas in the world O Pioneers! By her in depth knowledge, Cather presents the culture and the history of plains and the people in O Pioneers! Cather wishes to influence her readers by her writings. This O Pioneers! Clearly satisfies the needs of the readers. Cather works a parallel between Marie and Emil, and Alexandra and Carl. In O Pioneers! Cather represents the possibility of both magnificent success and tremendous failure. This paper explains the character's nature, the other model values and portrays the pioneering spirit in O Pioneers!*

**KEYWORDS:** Civilization, Ecclesiastical Ideas, Lovers

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#### INTRODUCTION

Myths, legends, tales and lyrics which are uttered by the mouth serve as a recipient for any kind of literature. American literature also has the same recipients as the beginning. There was no written literature initially. The first known and sustained contact between the Americans and the rest of the world began with the famous voyage of an Italian Explorer, Christopher Columbus. As American minority literature continues to flower in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and American life becomes increasingly multicultural, scholars are rediscovering the importance of the continents mixed ethnic heritage. The U S civil war (1861 – 1865) between the industrial North and the agricultural brought to many changes in the literature. From 1860 to 1914, the United States was transformed from a small, young, agricultural excolony to a huge, modern, industrial nation. As industrialization grew, the literature also bloomed. In that realist period, the most prominent writers, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) (1839 – 1910), Bret Harte (1836 – 1902), William Dean Howells (1837 – 1920), Edith Wharon (1862 – 1937), Stephen crane (1871 – 1900), Jack London (1876 – 1916), Theodore Dreiser (1871 – 1945), Edger Lee Masters (1868 – 1950), Vachel Lindsay (1879 – 1931), Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869 – 1935), Ellen Glasgow (1873 – 1945), and Willa Cather (1873 – 1947), explored and evoked the settings of Americans in every aspects. Several women writers are remembered for their fine depictions of New England.

By birth Willa Cather was a Virginian, but she grew up on Nebraska and she perpetuated herself by her famous novels *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Antonia* (1918) and her story *Neighbour Rosicky* (1928). During her life time, she became increasingly alienated from the materialism of modern life and wrote of alternative visions in the American Southwest and in the past. Cather's works commemorate important aspects of the American experience.

Willa Cather's early novels – *O Pioneers* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Antonia* (1918), exhibited the literary periods and provided the evidence of struggle between a new order and a dying one. Her *O Pioneers!* showed the beginnings of fulfillment. Willa Cather dedicated her first novel, *O Pioneers!* To the memory of Sarah Orne Jewett. Cather's heroines, Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!* Theo Kronbrog in *The Song of the Lark*, Antonia Shermida in *My Antonia* are not the darlings of heroes but heroes themselves. Alexandra drags her dull brothers after her and establish the family fortunes.

In this story, *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra Bergson, the only daughter of Swedish immigrants to the Nebraska prairie, has a peculiar kinship with the land; she is simple, primeval, robust with a strain of hardness, heroic. When her father dies, Alexandra use all her good sense and her powers of imagination and persuasation to wrest a living for herself, her mother, and her three brothers from the inhospitable land. Sixteen years later, having tamed the prairie and erected a comfortable homestead, Alexandra now looks with satisfaction on her achievement and in anticipation of her youngest brother Emil's possibilities. Her dreams for his future are dashed, however, when Emil falls in love with a married woman, the lively and lovely Bohemian Marie Tovesky Shabata. When Marie's husband, Frank, murders the lovers, Alexandra must draw on all her resources of hope and faith and her intuitive understanding of the cycles of death and renewal to rise from despair. With her in the end is a childhood friend, Carl Linstrum, whose appreciation of Alexandra's deep capacity to love the land and its inhabitants will help her to heal. A celebration of the human spirit, an exploration of the tensions between the Old World and the New, and an encounter with the land that shaped it all, *O Pioneers!*, also announced the arrival of a distinctive literary vision and voice.

Throughout her writing Willa Cather shows her deep understanding of the spirit of youth its desire, aspiration, even its despair. Alexandra is the ability of creation, the story of a human civilization being shaped out of a land as flat and formless as the sea. Willa Cather's central characters are generally bold and imaginative and strive hard to accomplish a dream, through Alexandra's eye, the world is full of promise, and humans need only the courage of their conviction to make something of it. Alexandra can look out on the empty Nebraska prairie and imagine vast checkerboard fields of wheat and corn and set about to create them.

#### **Scheme of *O Pioneer!***

Part I of *O Pioneers!*, titled, "The Wild Land", establishes the fact of the land and its powerful presence in and effect on the lives of Alexandra. When the novel opens, Cather introduces Alexandra as a 16-year-old girl and her relation to each other. Following her father's death, her heroic efforts to preserve the family farm describes the hardships and the feelings. After three years of her father's death, when other immigrants including Carl Linstrum, who is her best friend, have given up on their chances of success and returned to the cities of the East, Alexandra decided to be in the farm and begins to speculate on land. Thirteen years later, as years grow, her lands become prosperous and the instincts become right, her nature acquires maturity. Sixteen years after Mr. Bergson's death, the "Wild Land" has been tamed into a checker board of fertile fields.

Part II of *O Pioneers!*' suggestion is not so much about the connection between humans and the land as it is about the relationships between humans themselves. Alexandra, owns one of the most prosperous land on the divide, now ready to enjoy her success and to cultivate relationship. In the Part III, the marriage between Amedee and Angelique Chevaliar, supply the way for the other lovers' pain and the promise of human love. "Winter Memories", Part III of *O Pioneers*, builds an atmosphere of suspended living and mounting tension. This part creates an expeience for Alexandra. She is waiting for

the promise of spring and new life. There is no significant event in part III, but it provides a psychological depth to Cather's characterization of Alexandra. She is described as resourcefulness and strength of will. Cather offers two "winter memories" that reveal something of the self that Alexandra keeps hidden from others and even that she seldom explores herself. The first memory recalls one of the happiest days in her life (Early novels and stories 238), when she and Emil had watched a solitary wild duck "swimming and diving and preening her feathers ", with such inhibited joy that in the instant Alexandra had intuited life's beauty. The second recalls Alexandra's "fancy" of a strong man who lifts her in his arms as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat rescuing her from weariness and solitude. These "Winter Memories" reveal a romantic side to Alexandra's character that may account for her intuitive identification with the land and that also suggests a vulnerability that her physical presence generally belies.

The Part IV titled, "The White Mulberry Tree", brings the love affair between Emil and Marie and their death intrudes into this garden. Armed with his rifle, Frank searches for Marie and when he finds her in the orchard, fires three shots and then leaves the lovers to die. In this section of *O Pioneers!*, it seems that romantic love and passion are doomed by the forces of man and nature. In the novel's final section, titled "Alexandra", Cather reintegrates her heroine into the natural life cycle. Gradually emerging from grief, Alexandra travels first to the university at Lincoln to learn something of Emil's life there and then to the state prison to reconcile with Frank Shabata and thereby include him within the human community. Alexandra undertakes these difficult journeys unaccompanied by family or friends, but she returns to the Divide to be comforted by Carl, who had read of the family tragedy in a four-week-old San Francisco newspaper and then made his way by steamer and train to be by her side. *O Pioneers!* restores the balance between the transient and the eternal, and Cather celebrates both.

### Strength of Alexandra

At the heart of every section of *O Pioneers!* is Alexandra Bergson, Cather's protagonist, or central character, whose strength of being and purpose makes her a human complement to the land. Alexandra looks capable of facing any challenge. Like the women warriors of Greek mythology who cut off one breast to improve their prowess with the bow, Alexandra is the image of strength and determination. She is primed to stand firm against the vagaries of nature and to tame a wild land. Alexandra's strength comes at least in part from her innate good sense and native intelligence. Alexandra is resourceful and imaginative. She sees, for example, the possibility in the land, even though it resists cultivation, and determines to keep hold of her father's stake when her brothers prefer to sell. She even mortgages her family's future on the acquisition of new land, an act to which her brothers only grudgingly acquiesce but that eventually pays dividends, just as Alexandra had know it would. Before his death, John Bergson had rightly put his faith in his only daughter and entrusted his family's future to her. As a true pioneer, Alexandra not only understands the land but also develops an intimate relationship with it. Alexandra has taken root in the land and draws sustenance from it. Cather's primary female characters, different though they may be in their response to life, are both strong, capable women who refuse to submit to hardship and unhappiness. It is to Alexandra's care, after all, that John Bergson leaves his family at his death, and one of the irritants in the Shabata marriage is that Frank has been unable to make Mari humble herself to him.

Cather connects Alexandra to Demeter to emphasize her own life giving and life sustaining qualities. In addition to her ability to transform the Divide, she nurtures her younger brother Emil, supporting his efforts and encouraging his dreams, and effectively becomes his surrogate mother. Like Demeter's loss of her child, Emil's murder plunges Alexandra into despair, and although she cannot recover her child, she does find the strength to renew her faith in life. In fact, by the

novel's end, Cather has merged Alexandra's identity with the land's in a celebrity vision that foresees her great heart at ease in the bosom of the earth, which brings it forth again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth. Like Demeter's, Alexandra story is a promise of renewal for a new land that has such people in it.

### **Value of Friendship**

From Cather's life, one can perceive how she has contributed herself for her friends, her contributions for friendship and their values are well known in her novels. In this *O Pioneers!* through Alexandra Cather gives priority to friends. Alexandra loves her family members but her love towards her friends is further more appreciated than her relatives. Emil is a close friend to her, though he is a family member, her affection and her disappointments like why he wants to marry Marie is an usual thing for her. She couldn't digest Marie in this as she strongly believes her. Her friendship with Frank is thoroughly lovable throughout the novel. (Include quotations)

### **Loneliness**

Cather's view of life is quite different, she gives priority to her friends, but in her life she suffers loneliness also, Alexandra's sufferings are known only when Carl left for Alaska and Emil also has gone to Mexico. Her seclusion from Carl and Emil moulds her nature. Cather's imaginative act of writing, then, is to some degree analogous to Alexandra's talent with the land. Both are able, through steady, diligent work and imaginative vision, to transform mere potential into a cultivated reality.

### **Biblical Influence in *O Pioneers!***

Cather, who has the habit of reading Bible before writing, produces only quality prose. Cather's admiration for old testament as a literary text is apparent in her novel *O Pioneers!*. In *O Pioneers!*, she dramatizes the universal through the particular by using Alexandra to show how the history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman. James Woodress says on Cather that "She worked out a form that was loosely episodic and let the tale pace itself", this ultimately produced in Cather's words, 'a slow moving story'. By adapting the context and cadences of the Old Testament to the story of Swedes in Nebraska, Cather creates a novel that reaches back to the foundation of Western literature (The Old Testament) while simultaneously setting its author on the path to the immortality of iconic status.

Critical examinations of Cather and the Bible thus far have generally fallen into two categories: explications of allusions and attempts to link biblical influence with spiritual or religious identification. While Biblical style and influence is apparent throughout Cather's canon, many critics have used words like "archetypal" and iconic specifically in reference to *O Pioneers!*. Cather describes writing *O Pioneers!* as a sort of homecoming : "this was like taking a ride through a familiar country on a horse that knew the way, on a fine morning when you felt like riding" (Willa Cather on Writing 92-93). She similarly places the idea of homecoming at the thematic center of the Old Testament, which she calls "that greatest record of the orphan soul trying to find its kin somewhere in the universe. The structure of *O Pioneers!* is a special indication of her genuineness and her good quality. By using repeated references, Cather's distinctive nature of following Biblical Sense is well known to the readers. The novel introduces with the main characters Alexandra and Carl and also ends with their union. In the last scene, Emil and Marie are not found but their importance is shown by Alexandra, here we can see the influence of Bible in the novel. Cather's reading begins with Bible, so her works naturally involves Biblical references and also ecclesiastical views and the *O Pioneers!* also do. The Divide in *O Pioneers!* tests its inhabitants, as well. It has "its little joke", as Alexandra calmly remarks in retrospect, but while it was "pretending to be poor", it required

sacrifice and faith from the farmers, and Alexandra's belief in the land is gauged in precisely these terms. Certainly Alexandra senses the basic ephemerality that forms the backbone of Ecclesiastes when she tells Carl, "the land belongs to the future ... We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it- for a little while".

### Value of Land

All of Cather's characters struggle with themselves and others in *O Pioneers!* to forge a productive and satisfying life. They struggle as well with the land itself, for it effectively functions as an independent character in the novel. Cather endows her wild land with human characteristics, using personification to dignify its stature and make it an active participant in life's drama. The great fact of *O Pioneers!* is the land itself. Cather's use of language clearly invests the land with its own humanity, its own genius, as she calls it, and thus makes it one of the novel's most important characters. In doing so, she makes the contest of wills between the Divide and the pioneers as compelling as that between Marie and Frank Shabata or between Emil's conflicting desires. Her strategy also establishes the ground for her exploration of the relationship between the land and its human inhabitants that is a central theme of *O Pioneers!*. Indeed, she integrates that theme so tightly into her characterizations that it is virtually impossible to separate character from theme in the work.

Alexandra who thrives on the prairie seems to have the ability to adapt Old World customs to the challenges of the New. Indeed, they seem to embrace those challenges as opportunities for growth and development. They, of course, are Cather's true pioneers, forging their destinies in and with the land. Others, however, lack their vision or their resilience. They adapt to their new lives but seem somehow diminished by their experiences. Cather provides two different categories of this second type of immigrant, distinguished by their connection to their European roots.

### CONCLUSIONS

Cather's international theme extends her exploration of the relation between the land and its inhabitants. Her immigrants transported with them the Old Worlds habits and values that had transported with them the Old World Habits and values shaped them, and they in turn help shape the New World order that the immigrants are in process of making. The Divide is a physical as well as a psychological frontier, and as Cather's pioneers negotiate their way through both, they gradually lay claim to a place and a self. Willa Cather was not influenced by criticism; through trial and error she had found her field and was aware of her limitations as well as her possibilities. She was always grateful for praise. She resented the sort of criticism that is based on careless reading.

Alexandra, it is in the midst of prosperity, with all her brothers save the youngest happily married, her land increased by hundreds of acres, all yielding fabulous harvests, and Alexandra herself on the threshold of her fortieth year, and, with all her success, keenly conscious of the emptiness of her life, the craving for the love of husband and of children. Of course, it requires no keen guess-work to foresee that the young neighbor of her youth will ultimately return and the discrepancy of their ages will be forgotten. Alexandra is the story of creation, the story of a human civilization being shaped out of a land as flat and formless as the sea. Emil and Marie's is the story of lovers cast from the earth's garden through sin. However, there are more than two parts to *O Pioneers!*; the novel attests to Cather's surprising eclecticism as a writer, her ability to combine literary traditions and styles successfully. Between Alexandra's epic taming of the wild land and her final recognition of its eternity, Cather interweaves domestic drama and social satire, stories of friendship love and illicit passion, manslaughter and spiritual struggle. Developing from individual to universal concerns, the novel

espouses the themes of Whitman's poetry, especially that of life everlasting in "Leaves of Grass". The encompassing character of Alexandra becomes the integrating factor; through it Cather achieves unity despite her novel's dualistic beginnings and consequent lack of a "sharp skeleton"

Cather fills her novels with descriptive passages that evoke the beauty of the landscape because place, she recognizes, helps shape a worldview, providing a sense of the relationship between humans and the universe. During a period of rapid industrialization and increasing commercialism, Willa Cather had watched with dismay the transformation of American culture and values. The world in which she lived was far different from the Nebraska prairie of her youth, where she had observed the creation of another sort of culture, one produced by heroic action, force of will, and supple imagination. It was in this world that Cather found the inspiration of her true subject. As her companion Edith Lewis noted in her memoir of Cather, "she had a great gift for imaginative historical reconstruction, yet, there was nothing of the antiquarian in her; she did not care for old things because they were old or curious or rare – she cared for them only as they expressed the human spirit and the human lot on earth".

In *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra inspired by an idea that has become her life, she tamed the land and also she became the creator of new civilization. Thus Cather clearly invests her characters' commitment to their ideals with dignity and heroism. These elements of a literary career confirm Cather's place among the major American writers of the twentieth century. While the quality of her fiction may have declined with age and her disapproval of the modern world solidified, Cather was as much a critic of her era as her contemporaries, including fellow Midwesterners Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson. Cather's best fiction has a strength and individuality that promise her a continued place in American literary history.

There are few emotional climaxes, few catharses; instead, the novel proceeds at an even keel, emphasizing that no matter what events befall these individual characters, life on the land will continue as it is. Again, the land is the main organizing force of the novel. *O Pioneers!* provides us with several examples of Cather's style at once plain and poetic.

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